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ABSTRACT

In 1970 New Zealand had a small output of just 15 titles in children's literature. But much has happened over the last 30 years to ensure that New Zealand literature for children has an established footing: authors known and unknown have been encouraged to write, and publishers have been encouraged to seek the highest production standards. This paper explores some of the significant developments in children's literature in New Zealand. The paper first considers the establishment and conferment of various children's book awards. It then discusses organizations such as the Children's Literature Association, founded in 1969 with the express aim of promoting the best books for children, and the New Zealand Children's Book Foundation, which began in 1990 and has grown and expanded to promote its national ideal of literacy and good literature. The paper also discusses the annual Storyline Festival and the Writers in School Scheme, designed to allow both primary and secondary schools the opportunity of having New Zealand authors. It considers children's books in different genres during the 1980s ("a time of growth") and the 1990s (an average of 101 titles a year). The paper stresses that it will be important for the future of New Zealand in the 21st century that not just the serious readers keep literature alive. (NKA)

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W. F. Mills

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# Thirty Years of New Zealand's Children's Literature (1970-1999)

by Wayne F. Mills

By the end of the second millennium New Zealand had developed a significant collection of indigenous literature for children. From a small output of just fifteen published titles in 1970, many by authors scarcely remembered today, the number of titles published in 1999 had risen more than six-fold to 103, the quality of which stood proudly alongside the best in the world.

Much has happened over the last thirty years to ensure that New Zealand literature for children has an established footing: authors both known and unknown have been encouraged to write, and publishers have been encouraged to seek the highest production standards. It is my intention to explore some of these significant developments.

In 1970 the only children's book awards were administered by the New Zealand Library Association (NZLA). They were given in recognition of excellence in children's literature: the Esther Glen Award was presented to Margaret Mahy for *The Lion in the Meadow*, for her distinguished contribution to literature for children.(1) No award had been given for the five years prior to 1970, and the next award was presented in 1973, once again to Margaret Mahy for *The First Margaret Mahy Story Book*.

The conferment of children's book awards continued to be haphazard until the early 1980's. In 1978 the New Zealand Library and Information Association (NZLIA) inaugurated the Russell Clark Award for the most distinguished pictures or illustrations in a children's book, with or without text. The first recipient was Robert Jahnke for his illustrations in *The House of the People*, written by Ron Bacon.(2)

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In 1982 a new group of awards was presented, not by the NZLIA but by the New Zealand Government Printer. These new awards ran alongside the existing library awards and consisted of two categories: Best Picture Book and Best Story Book. The winners that year were *The Kuia and the Spider* by Patricia Grace, illustrated by Robyn Kahukiwa, and *The Silent One* by Joy Cowley.

In 1990 the Government Printer awards became the AIM Children's Book Awards, administered jointly by Booksellers New Zealand and Creative New Zealand. The first recipients were *Annie and Moon* by Miriam Smith, illustrated by Lesley Moyes, and *Alex in Winter* by Tessa Duder. The AIM Awards carried substantial monetary prizes and were widely publicised. To win such an award significantly increased sales of that title to the public. In 1992 the concept of a Best First Book was introduced and the inaugural winner was *Out Walked Mel* by Paula Boock. (In 2000 this award carried a $1000 prize). Additionally prizes may be awarded for Honour books. The categories were further widened in 1993, when fiction was divided into junior and senior, and a nonfiction category was added, to be won by Chris Gaskin for *Picture Magic: Illustrating a Picture Book.*(3)

In 1995 the AIM Awards, in conjunction with Booksellers New Zealand, added a new supreme award to be known as the Book of the Year Award. This award was to be presented to one of the four category winners. In addition to the $5000 category prize, the winner received an additional $5000 for this extra accomplishment. If the awards had been slightly competitive in the past, they became even more so now. The first winner was *The Fat Man* by Maurice Gee, which had also won the Junior Fiction category.

In 1997 after a change in sponsorship support the Aim Children's Book Awards were rebranded the New Zealand Post Children's Book Awards. To mark this change the conferment of a new award was made known as the Children's Choice Award. This award enabled children throughout New Zealand to vote for their favourite book. Although the author/illustrator did not receive any monetary reward, they had the satisfaction of knowing that their book was 'loved by kids'. The first recipient was *Mechanical Harry* by Bob Kerr.

Although overdue and only established late in this period, an award was finally presented for a distinguished contribution to literature for children by a book written in te reo Maori. This prize was presented by the NZLIA in 1996 to Katarina Mataira for *Marama Tangiweto.*

Two further awards need to be mentioned. First, the Tom Fitzgibbon Award to a previously unpublished children's writer. This award was intended to foster New Zealand's children's writers. The award, administered by the New Zealand Children's Book Foundation and sponsored by Scholastic NZ Ltd to the amount of $1500, has worked to encourage and expose the talents of several new authors, such as Iona McNaughton, Heather Cato, Vince Ford and Shirley Corlett. Second is the Gaelyn Gordon Award for a Much-Loved Book. This award was in recognition of

a book that had been enjoyed by children for many years but which at the time of publication had never won a major award (although it may have been shortlisted for an award). Just as *Gaelyn Gordon* had never won one of the major awards, neither had *The Runaway Settlers* when it was first published in 1965. This award was presented for the first time in 1999 to Elsie Locke, it carried a small monetary token and a memorial certificate.

The entire question of book awards is problematic (a problem not only endemic to New Zealand) as people grapple with issues such as objectivity, criteria, and the question of whether we even need to honour and reward excellence in writing for children. An increased number of awards have made it difficult to compare books for children aged 5-12 years with older children/young adults aged 13-18. The divisions both within and between these age groups have grown increasingly complex. The demarcations are no longer so clear-cut. Children read young adult works and similarly young adults read novels ostensibly written for children or for adults. Perhaps the difficulty has lain with the nomenclature 'children's'. Clearly adolescents do not consider themselves children, yet books intended for adolescents/young adults win awards known as children's book awards (albeit awarded for senior fiction). Senior fiction is not, as mistakenly perceived by some members of the public, literature for senior children in primary education, but rather senior fiction in secondary education.

It is imperative that additional category(ies) be added to include: young adults (teenagers and upper secondary aged 13-18); a junior fiction category for beginning chapter books (ages 5-8); and an intermediate fiction category (ages 9-12).

A further problem, and one that I believe requires attention, has been the exclusion of picture books written by a New Zealander, but illustrated by a foreigner. This has happened more regularly than one would think, with such titles as *Beaten by a Balloon* and *The Three-Legged Cat*, both written by Margaret Mahy but illustrated by British illustrator Jonathan Allen being ineligible for the New Zealand Post Awards.

An area of some concern, and a difficult one to predict, is when a novel is omitted from the New Zealand awards shortlist of nominees only to turn up shortlisted in an international selection. It is hoped that The Gaelyn Gordon Much-Loved Book Award should go some way towards addressing such oversights, but only for future books, and not at the time they perhaps deserve to be selected.

For many years the number of selected titles for either the LIANZA or the New Zealand Post Children's Awards has stood at twenty. That so few have been chosen has not done justice to the other titles published in that same year. In order to remedy this, in 1999 the New Zealand Children's Book Foundation published their Notable New Zealand Children's and Young Adult

Booklist. It listed four categories, with ten titles in each, effectively exposing forty titles (and potentially forty authors) to the glare of increased educational and media attention.

The Children's Choice Award has invariably gone to a children's picture book, and while this is commendable, it is difficult to see how a novel could win when picture books are accessible to a much wider readership than novels. This issue may be addressed in the future by electronic voting, recording votes from primary/secondary students and schools.

So far, all the above issues have focused on awards to authors/illustrators for their books. But other awards exist in the form of literary grants, scholarships or writers-in-residence in recognition of authors'/illustrators' contribution to children's literature.

Literary grants to children's writers/illustrators have been parsimonious when compared to grants to adult writers/illustrators. During the funding year 1997/98, writers for adults received more than nine times the amount given to writers for children. This may have been because there were fewer applications by children's writers - discouraged perhaps by their chances - or because writers for adults are more deserving? One wonders whether the levelling out in submissions to the New Zealand Post Awards was not due in part to the decline in grants to children's authors/illustrators by Creative New Zealand.

There was a plethora of new authors for children in the first twenty of these thirty years, but one is hard-pressed to list new, regularly published authors in the last ten years. With a few notable exceptions, such as Boock, Noonan, De Goldi and Westaway, the predicted increase as indicated by past years has not been fulfilled. Over the last thirty years we have witnessed a situation where the personality of the author has eclipsed that of the book. Consequently it has become more difficult for a new author to become established. Already under pressure from economic constraints, established publishers have tended to foster the tried and true rather than the experimental and new. With this in mind, awards often act as incentives in encouraging new authors to submit manuscripts for publication. While often only one author will win an award, new authors may get exposed in the process of an award. Notable examples are David Calder and Sarah Ell.

Awards by tertiary institutions to writers-in-residence, once common in the 1980's, had dried up by 1999, with the exception of Dunedin College of Education. These awards allowed authors to write full time for a year, while contributing to students' courses and encouraging children's writing.

Awards for significant contributions to children's literature have been given not only by literary organisations but also by the New Zealand government and New Zealand universities. The government honoured Margaret Mahy in 1993 with the

coveted Order of New Zealand. This is a life award held by only twenty New Zealanders at any one time. Others to receive OBEs have been Joy Cowley (1992), Dorothy Butler (1993), and Tessa Duder (1994). Universities to award honorary doctorates of literature have been Canterbury to Elsie Locke in 1987 and Margaret Mahy in 1993 and Massey University to Joy Cowley in 1993.

The New Zealand Children's Book Foundation awards the annual Margaret Mahy Medal to a person who has made an especially significant contribution to children's literature, in the fields of publishing or literacy. The first to be awarded the medal was Margaret Mahy herself in 1991. Similarly, the Children's Literature Association presents an award for outstanding contribution to New Zealand children's literature, and this is open to teachers, booksellers, librarians and authors. The award was first given in 1990, to Eve Sutton.

Organisations (people-power) are needed to drive these awards. The LIANZA awards (given since 1945) may be in jeopardy. The cost of hosting and promoting such a major literary award is frequently expensive, and as there was no sponsorship in 1999, an award was not given. The New Zealand Post Awards, however, seem secure, especially with New Zealand Post as a major sponsor, and these awards continue to grow in popularity and esteem.

The Children's Literature Association, founded in 1969 with the express aim of promoting the best books for children, grew rapidly through the 1970's and early 1980s, but economic pressure and static membership saw the organisation lose its early enthusiasm and impetus. Meanwhile the New Zealand Children's Book Foundation, which began in 1990, had grown and expanded in order to promote its national ideal of literacy and good literature. The two organisations, which have somewhat similar objectives, decided in 1999 to enter into discussions to consider the possibility of a merger, the aim being to form one united front to promulgate children's literature locally, nationally and internationally, to encourage research, and to lobby nationally on behalf of literature for children.(4) The outcome of these discussions will shape the future direction for both organisations.

Outside these awards, one of the foremost literary events of the NZCBF has been the annual Storylines Festival, held each year since 1994. This festival is second only to the New Zealand Post Children's Book Festival, which usually runs March-April. The Storylines Festival is held in conjunction with the Aotea Arts Community Programme: The Edge, and together with their respective committees, coordinator and members, they host a huge Sunday family day that can attract crowds of 8-10,000 people. The day consists of writers interacting with children, illustrators painting giant walls or books, storytellers spinning yarns, live theatre, book grottos, the national final of the Paper Plus Kids' Lit Quiz(tm) and a miscellany of other literature-focused events. This event has done much to cultivate the literary talents of our nation's writers, authors and storytellers for children and young people, and to foster a love of literature. In the events preceding the Sunday culmination, author/illustrator bus tours to schools, book

gigs, writer's workshops and regional quiz finals have been held. This festival has driven and sparked interest in children's literature during the 1990's. It has ensured that children have had the opportunity to see the faces behind the words and the illustrations of their books during a period when other forms of media (often electronic) have competed for their attention.

The 1970's was a period of self-consciousness, social upheaval and conservation, and children's books often reflected this earnestness and these concerns. Prior to this period, New Zealand children had been exposed to a diet of mainly British books, such as *Beatrix Potter*, *Noddy*, *The Famous Five* series, *Winnie the Pooh*, and *Biggles*. It felt unfamiliar to be reading about ourselves in such titles as *Tat: The Story of a New Zealand Sheep Dog* by Neil McNaughton; *The Big Flood* by Ruth Dallas, and *Again the Bugles Blow* by Ron Bacon. The diversity of literature was appearing but the quality was often doubtful, and the paper, binding and colour reproduction poor. Some gems, however, stood out: *My Cat Likes to Hide in Boxes* by Eve Sutton and illustrated by Lynley Dodd, *X Marks the Spot* by Joan de Hamel, and *The Great Piratical Rumbustification* by Margaret Mahy. By 1973 the New Zealand Herald was providing regular reviewing space to children's books. In 1999 the same national newspaper was serialising both national and international books in an attempt to encourage children as readers and to provide their parents and caregivers with reading pointers. This initiative was a three-way venture between the New Zealand Herald, the New Zealand Reading Association and the New Zealand Children's Book Foundation. The first book serialised was The Wild West *Gang*, by Joy Cowley.

In 1972 the New Zealand Book Council was established to raise awareness in books for both adults and children, and importantly in 1977 it established the Writers in School Scheme. The scheme was designed to allow both primary and secondary schools the opportunity of having New Zealand authors. Membership of the scheme entitled a school to one sponsored visit per year. In 1977 only thirty-nine writers were available; by 1999 that number had swelled to 150. Today the odds of a New Zealand child not being able to name a New Zealand author or not having met one are slight.

The 1980's were a time of growth. Many new authors flourished and children's literature was burgeoning. Children's literature comfortably reflected aspects of our culture and children moved easily between the real world and the printed world of their indigenous literature. There was a noticeable increase in science fiction/fantasy, with titles such as *The Keeper* by Barry Faville, *The Lake at the End of the World* by Caroline Macdonald, *The Halfmen of O* by Maurice Gee, *Time Twister* by Ged Maybury, and *Aliens in the Family* by Margaret Mahy. This theme had not been explored widely until this time.

Books about Maori and their myths and legends were popular. Titles by Patricia Grace, with illustrations by Robyn Kahukiwa, and tales by Ron Bacon were significant in allowing Maori children to see themselves mirrored in their

literature. They also diluted the preponderance of images reflecting Pakeha culture. The highly colourful picture books by Peter Gossage also assisted to expose large numbers of children to the myths and legends of Maori.

The first biography of a New Zealand children's author appeared. *Introducing Margaret Mahy*, by Betty Gilderdale, and an earlier book by Betty Gilderdale, *A Sea Change: 145 Years of New Zealand Junior Fiction*, had overviewed New Zealand children's literature, culminating with the first eight years of the 1970's. Three further critical works appeared, two by Dorothy Butler: *Babies Need Books* and *Five to Eight*; and one by Diane Hebley: *Off the Shelf: Twenty-one Years of New Zealand Books for Children*. These titles assisted parents, librarians and teachers to source worthwhile titles for their children.

In the mid-1980's a lively canine creation burst his way into the hearts of New Zealand children: *Hairy Maclary from Donaldson's Dairy*. Hairy, accompanied by his doggie friends, strutted and barked his exploits in a whole series of superbly alliterative and rhyming picture books by author Lynley Dodd. Her talent appears to be boundless; some seventeen years later a further Hairy book, *Hairy Maclary and Zachary Quack*, was shortlisted for the national book awards and was subsequently voted children's choice in that year, an enduring accolade to his popularity.

Gwenda Turner was the author/illustrator of this period who most noticeably influenced the preschool market. Her titles, such as *New Zealand ABC*, *New Zealand 123*, *Snow Play* and *Colours* provided highly realistic, colourful and identifiable New Zealand images for young children to marvel at.

The most significant of all the awards made during the 1980's were undoubtedly the two Carnegie Medals awarded to Margaret Mahy for *The Haunting and The Changeover*. Both books had supernatural themes. In the first, Barney found himself haunted by the ghost of Great-Uncle Cole, while in the second title Laura was forced to save her young brother Jacko from having his life force drained from him by an evil Mr Braque. That these two titles won awards, both here and in Britain, was testament to the creative genius of Mahy, whose talents to date show no indication of exhaustion. A further title, *Memory*, was runner-up for the Carnegie Awards in 1988.

The first title in the highly successful *Alex* quartet by Tessa Duder was published in 1987. There had never been a more assertive and accomplished young teenage protagonist to capture the spirit of the eighties. So successful was the quartet that each individual title won a major literary award, from Esther Glen, to Government Printer, to AIM. In 1993, *Alex* appeared as a movie, courtesy of Isambard Productions with funding from the New Zealand Film Commission and the Australian Film Commission.

The 1980's were a time when titles appeared that explored social issues in ways that had not previously occurred: in *The Lake* by Lasenby, Ruth ran away from home to avoid being molested by her stepfather; *The Web: The Triumph of a New Zealand Girl Over Anorexia* by Deborah Furley was a gritty account of a young girl's triumph over anorexia and incest; *Memory* (previously mentioned), by Margaret Mahy, exposed an unusual friendship between a 19-year-old male and an old woman suffering from Alzheimer's disease; the picture book, *What's Wrong With Bottoms?* by Jenny Hessell and Mandy Nelson handled sensitively the issue of exposure and unwelcome touch by a relative.

The 1990's saw a plateau reached in the publication of children's literature. From a peak of 138 titles in 1996, the decade settled to an average of 101 titles annually. Meanwhile, throughout this period a growing emphasis in literacy and its means of acquisition gained momentum. Although most New Zealand children did well at reading, there was evidence that some did not perform so well. A taskforce was established and in 1999 The Report of the Literacy Task Force was handed to the government, wherein committee members endorsed the government's goal that "by 2005, every child turning nine will be able to read, write and do maths for success". The shape and influence of this objective will be keenly followed.

The decade's concern with literacy and access to children's literature prompted author Alan Duff to launch his Alan Duff Charitable Foundation's Books in Homes scheme in 1995. This was an attempt to give children books to own and take home. With over 150 participating schools, it has been seen as an effective concept in encouraging children to read and in promoting literature.

The 1990's assaulted the boundaries of what constituted children's literature in ways unimagined. The problem festers because of inaccurate and vague terminology, such as 'child' and 'children's' literature. When does a child become a young adult? The concept of teenager is clearer, but child and children are not. Therefore it came as no surprise when public controversy was aroused by titles such as *The Fat Man* by Maurice Gee, a story of revenge over past grievances upon Colin Potter and his family; or *The Blue Lawn* by William Taylor, an account of a developing homosexual relationship between two secondary school boys; *Dare, Truth or Promise* by Paula Boock, about two young women coming to terms with their sexual identities; and finally, *Closed, Stranger* by Kate De Goldi, in which issues of incest, suicide and betrayal are sensitively handled. That three of these titles won major national book awards speaks highly of their superb characterisation and literary style.

Positive developments in this decade were the production and design features given to many of the award-winning picture books. With hard covers, attractive endpapers and advanced colour printing, books such as *The Bantam and The Soldier* by Jennifer Beck, illustrated by Robyn Belton, and *The Best-Loved Bear* by Diana Noonan, illustrated by Elizabeth Fuller, have lifted standards and concomitantly attracted readers.

One author in particular dominated the nonfiction field in the 1990's, and that was Andrew Crowe. Three titles in particular: *Which Native Forest Plant?, The Life-Size Guide to Native Trees and Other Common Plants of New Zealand's Native Forest*, and *Nature's Alphabet: A New Zealand Nature Trail* all showed his enthusiasm and passion for New Zealand's flora and fauna in readily retrievable ways. These titles, along with dozens of others, have sprinkled their information throughout the nonfiction shelves of New Zealand libraries.

Another author/illustrator combination produced one of this decade's most eccentric, adventurous and good-time grannies known to New Zealand children. Beginning with Grandma McGarvey in 1990, Jenny Hessell and Trevor Pye have teamed up to produce a further four titles during this period.

Surprisingly few sports books for children had been published prior to the 1990's. Given New Zealanders' fascination for sport and its heroes, this was remarkable. Since the *Alex* quartet in the 1980's, many sports titles have been published. David Hill, in particular, has been an accomplished author in this field. With titles such as *Kick Back* (tae kwon do), *Second's Best* (cricket) and *Boots 'n' All* (hockey), he has led the charge. But other authors: Fleur Beale, with *Slide the Corner* (car rallying); John Lockyer with *Tough Tackle* (rugby); Denis Edwards with *Killer Moves* (rugby league); Sarah Ell with *Fired Up* (yachting); Trevor Wilson with *Going for Gold* (cross-country running); and Getchen Brassi with *Riding the Rough* (water skiing) all contributed to make this one of the decade's most productive genres.

With continued growth and interest in children's literature, it was essential that New Zealand be able to award its own qualification in children's literature and thereby confer dignity to children's literature as a field of serious study. In 1992 the Christchurch College of Education offered a Diploma in Children's Literature. The course required candidates to select a number of optional and compulsory modules of children's literature papers in various levels. This diploma has broadened knowledge and increased expertise in the field of children's literature. Likewise, the one undergraduate paper offered at the University of Waikato encouraged students to study children's literature seriously. Some post-graduate papers have been offered intermittently at the University of Waikato and Auckland College of Education, but they have failed to be ongoing.

In the field of academic endeavour, Diane Hebley stood out in the 1990's. In 1992 she became the first resident New Zealander to complete a doctoral thesis in New Zealand children's literature, and she subsequently used her research to publish *The Power of Place: Landscape in New Zealand Children's Fiction, 1970-1989*. This authoritative publication considered the power of setting in children's literature; in particular, it commented upon the frequency of the pervasiveness of the seascape.

Children in the 1990's had to compete with increased (and continuing) influences from electronic games, the World Wide Web, television, film, and video (including DVDs). These children are often materially rich, but time poor. With many more influences competing for children's time and attention, the book needs to be marketed aggressively, have strong visual impact (displayed cover out) and be specifically focused at the reader. As the pursuit of the leisure dollar has intensified, it has become increasingly obvious that schools must appoint specialist book purchasers to ensure quality rather than quantity, that children are exposed to new titles by enthusiastic teachers through school magazines and Internet sites such as www.allsorts.co.nz and www.englishunitecnology.ac.nz. Booksellers must likewise anticipate their customers' needs in much the same way that big Internet booksellers currently profile their customers' reading tastes, mount in-store promotions, keep them abreast of new titles by their favourite authors and introduce them to new ones, and hire staff with knowledge about children's books. Public libraries must provide better opening hours (like supermarkets), set up homework stations with Internet and reference facilities, and continue to purchase the latest and greatest titles from around the world.

The twenty-first century will be a time when parents openly demand that their children can read, and with less time for reading it is likely that children's book of quality rather than quantity will be sought. There is likely to be an increasing reliance upon awards and publicity (to a lesser extent, reviewing journals) to ascertain this quality. It will be important to continue to examine critically the books that will shape the futures of tomorrow's adult. It will be important to the future of our country that it is not just the serious readers who keep literature alive. Nonfiction titles lend themselves to disk and are likely to go that way; the danger becomes that children may slip into the easy thought that unless they see it on the screen, it can't be right. It is less likely that fiction will go this way, as the story's intimacy with its tale of human experience, coupled with its portability, ought to ensure the book's survival.

## References

1) In 1992 the New Zealand Library Association became the New Zealand Library and Information Association (NZLIA) as a reflection of the technological changes occurring in information technology. A further name change was made in 1998 to the Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa (LIANZA).

2) It is important here to make the distinction between this award and the later New Zealand Post Award, as this later award was for an integrated picture book that took account of the synchronicity between both illustrations and text.

3) The NZLIA had instituted the first-ever non-fiction award in 1987, the recipient of which was Gaijin: Foreign Children in Japan by Olive and Ngaio Hill.

4) The distinguishing difference between the two organisations has been the child and parent involvement at a more local level by the CLA.